

*Majlinda Kelmendi: an Icon*

Growing up in a man's world is a difficult reality women are forced to put up with everyday. They are not treated with the same respect and attentiveness that any average man would, which can be very discouraging, especially to young, female aspiring athletes. However, Majlinda Kelmendi, who was a victim of this type of ideology, kept pursuing her passion for judo, a sport of combat, despite the judgmental looks.

Coming from Kosovo, a young country, Majlinda already had an innate disadvantage. But this only made her more eager to succeed, it gave her another reason to excel. This soothed my mind as a child, since I was always looking for a reason to prove to myself that I *can* do what I put my mind to, even though I was just a little girl, and Majlinda guided me in doing just that.

Growing up, most of the representation I saw of women in sports was of women with more masculine features, which made me feel dejected since I always valued my femininity and thought that I had to shed it to follow my dreams if I wanted to be successful. Although, Majlinda gave me hope when she would show up on National Television parading her ladylike qualities, wearing dresses, makeup, and having her hair done. She still made it as a strong fighter in a traditionally masculine sport like

judo while being feminine at the same time. She changed a stigma that had been imprinted on me since a very young age; I didn't have to change myself in order to follow my passions.

Though she worked endlessly, day and night, beginning at an early age, no one really believed in her: a young, hopeless teenager competing at her local martial arts tournaments, which were "made for men." That is until she found out that she had qualified for the Olympic games.

She might have been competing alone but she was not lonely, little did she know, she had all of Kosovo riding on her back. I still remember what a serious accomplishment it was, just qualifying. The whole country was waiting in anticipation, watching Majlinda fight her way to the top.

She left the Olympic games with a gold medal, becoming the first ever athlete from Kosovo to ever even win *any* medal at the Olympic games. It was more than just winning a sports match, it was proving that "even though we are women, we can still become champions," as proclaimed by Majlinda.

When I saw the results, I mentally freaked out, a wall that had been shading me all my life had finally fallen; a feeling I'd never felt before and would never get used to. That day, I felt unstoppable, like nothing could ever be in my way, I finally felt like I was capable, after so long. A tenderness that I only had the chance to discern thanks to the

icon who unironically saved me, Majlinda Kelmendi.